

The Author of the *Fundamental Wisdom*— Nagarjuna

Nagarjuna was born into a brahmin family probably around the middle of the first or early second century C.E. in South India in Vidarbha, a kingdom located in present-day Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh.

He was predicted by the Buddha in sutras such as the *Descent into Lanka Sutra* (Skt. *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*, Tib. *lan-kar gshegs-pa'i mdo*), the *Great Cloud Sutra* (Skt. *Mahāmeghasūtra*, Tib. *sprin chen po'i mdo*) and the *Great Drum Sutra* (Skt. *Mahābherihāraka-parivartasūtra*, Tib. *rnga-bo che chen-po'i mdo*).

At birth, a fortune-teller predicted Nagarjuna would live only seven days, but if his parents made offerings to a hundred monks, he could live to be seven years old. Fearing for his life, at age seven, his parents sent Nagarjuna to Nalanda Monastic University in North India. There the Buddhist master Saraha told him that if he became a monk and recited the Amitabha mantra, he would lead a long life. Nagarjuna did so and joined the monastery, receiving the name “Shrimanta.”

At Nalanda, Nagarjuna studied sutra and tantra with Ratnamati and, with Saraha, especially the *Guhyasamaja Tantra* (Tib. *dpal gsang-ba 'dus-pa'i rgyud*). In addition, he learned alchemy from a brahmin, and gained the ability to transmute iron into gold. Using this ability, he was able to feed the Nalanda monks during famine. Eventually, Nagarjuna became the abbot of Nalanda. There, he expelled eight thousand monks who were not keeping the vinaya monastic rules of discipline properly. He also defeated five hundred non-Buddhists in debate.

Nagarjuna brought back a copy of the *The Hundred Thousand Verse Prajnaparamita Sutra* (Skt. *Śatasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, Tib. *shes-rab kyi pha-rol-tu phyin-pa stong-pa brgya-pa*) from the realm of the nagas, which was kept there for safekeeping, and thereby reintroduced the teachings of the *Prajnaparamita Sutras* that were no longer available in India.

He is widely considered one of the most important masters of the Nalanda tradition and the pioneer of Madhyamika philosophy. He transmitted the lineage teachings of the profound view of emptiness from Manjushri. (Asanga was the pioneer of Chittamatra philosophy and transmitted the lineage teachings of the extensive bodhisattva practices from Maitreya.)

Among the many texts on sutra topics that Nagarjuna wrote are his *Collections of Reasoning* (Tib. *rigs tshogs*), *Collections of Praises* (Tib. *bstod tshogs*), and *Collections of Advice* (Tib. *gtam tshogs*). His *Collections of*

Reasoning constitute six texts, usually referred to as *Six Collections of Reasoning of the Middle Way* (Tib. *dbu-ma rigs tshogs drug*)

The six texts are:

1. **Fundamental Wisdom** (Skt. *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Tib. *dbu-ma rtsa-ba shes-rab*)

In 27 chapters and 449 verses it extensively presents the middle way view of emptiness and dependent arising and serves as the foundation of the other five texts.

2. **Sutra Called “Finely Woven”** (Skt. *Vaidalyasutra*, Tib. *zhib-mo rnam-‘thag zhes-bya-ba’i mdo*)

Refutes the non-buddhist Nyaiyayika’s view of sixteen categories.

3. **Rebuttal of Objections** (Skt. *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, Tib. *rtsod-pa zlog-pa*)

Supplement to the first chapter of the *Fundamental Wisdom*: shows that despite their emptiness words, logical reasoning and so forth are effective in establishing reality.

4. **Seventy Verses on Emptiness** (Skt. *Śūnyatāsaptati*, Tib. *stong-nyid bdun-bcu-pa*).

Supplement to the seventh chapter of the *Fundamental Wisdom*: composed in response to an argument against the last verse of this chapter.

5. **Sixty Verses of Reasoning** (Skt. *Yuktiṣaṣṭikā*, Tib. *rigs-pa drug-cu-pa*)

Shows that in order to achieve liberation it is necessary to understand the reality of existence and non-existence.

6. **Precious Garland** (Skt. *Ratnāvalī*, Tib. *rin-chen phreng-ba*)

Describes how to attain higher rebirths within samsara and how to attain liberation and enlightenment.

Included among his *Collections of Praise* are:

- *Praise to the Sphere of Reality* (Skt. *Dharmadhātu-stava*, Tib. *chos dbyings bstod pa*)
- *Praise to the Ultimate Truth* (Skt. *Paramārtha-stava*, Tib. *don-dam-par bstod-pa*)
- *Praise to the Supramundane* (Skt. *Lokātīta-stava*, Tib. *’jig-rten las ’das-par bstod-pa*)

Included among Nagarjuna’s *Collections of Advice* are:

- *Commentary on Bodhichitta* (Skt. *Bodhicittavivaraṇa*, Tib. *byang-chub sems kyi ’grel-ba*)
- *Compendium of Sutras* (Skt. *Sūtrasamuccaya*, Tib. *mdo kun-las btus-pa*)
- *Letter to a Friend* (Skt. *Suhrillekha*, Tib. *bshes-pa’i spring-yig*)

Also attributed to Nagarjuna are several commentaries on the *Guhyasamaja Tantra*, including:

- *Abbreviated Means for Actualization* (Skt. Piṇḍīkṛta-sādhana, Tib. *sgrub-thabs mdor-byas*)
- *Method for Meditating on the Generation Stage of the Mahayoga Tantra Guhyasamaja Mixed with Its Textual (Sources)* (Skt. Śrī-guhyasamāja-mahāyogatantra-utpattikrama-sādhana-sūtra-melāpaka, Tib. *rnal-'byor chen-po'i rgyud dpal gsang-ba 'dus-pa'i bskyed-pa'i rim-pa'i bsgom-pa'i thabs mdo-dang bsres-pa*)
- *The Five Stages* (Skt. Pañcakrama, Tib. *rim-pa lnga-pa*).

Nagarjuna's most famous disciple was Aryadeva, author of *Four Hundred Stanzas* (Skt. *Catuḥśatakaśāstra-kārikā*, Tib. *bzhi-brgya-pa*) and several commentaries on the *Guhyasamaja Tantra*.